

[Union and Strikes]

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[1938-9?] Mass.

Name—Jane K. Leary, 32 Acorn St.

Informant—John Healy, wife and son

Subject—The Shoemaker of Lynn

Section #7 [A?]

[1/11/39?] Shoe Shops

[11?] Copy-1

Unions and Strikes

Most a the strikes in my day in the shops wuz caused by competition. One manufacturer would take a few cents off a pair a shoes, and then the other manufacturer would have ta do the same if he wuz ta sell his shoes. Say he had a customer fur a good many years and that customer found he could buy the same kinda shoes from some one else fur less money. Well, he'd have ta sell 'em fur less too. [?]

“So the manufacturer'd take somethin' off twenty or thirty operations. He'd go roun' an' say, “ I want a cent a pair off this .” “. First thing ya know there'd be about thirty cents off a case. Sometimes that'd cause a strike.

I wuz never caught in a strike myself but I know they made a lotta misery in Lynn. The first big one wuz in the '60s. In '72 come the Ironclad. That wuz when the manufacturers

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drawed up the resolution to only pay wages that they all agreed on. They shut up their shops sooner than pay higher—they shops as belonged to the Ironclad. [?]

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“Another big strike wuz about [40] years ago. There wuz riots then. That wuz because of the fellas that come here from St. Louis to work ta keep the shops open. The American Federation brought 'em.

“In them days most a the unions a the shoe shops wuzn't joined up with the Federation or with unions in other places. There'd be a cutters union in one shop but it wun't be joined with the cutters in any other shop. Same way with the stock fitters and the edgesetters and the stitchers and the welters. “ If the cutters wanted ta go out, they'd offen got the stitchers ta go with 'em. That would most always cripple the shop. Fur the stitchers in the key to a shop. “ An another help in cripplin' a shop in a strike wuz the edgesetters. They wuz scarce. Not sa many knowed that trake trade . A shop din't need sa many fur one edgesetter could do as much work at edgesettin' as tn cutters could out cut . But ya needed ton ta make shoes jest the same, and because not many learned the trake trade , they wuz hard ta find ta do scabbin' time of a strike.

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“ The unions protected a fella in time of slack work. In the old days, part of the men would be laid off, but after the unions come in, the time would be divided up amongst all them members that had been in the shop fur six months. If ya quit though, ya wuz out until come a good time and ya could got a job in the shop fur six months agin. “ Them wuz the days when the unions wuz jest beginnin' ta gain power and sorta even up the power the men had with that the boss'es had. Today nothin' much more in thought of a shoe boss than is of a worker. But in my day, if you wuz a shoe boss, the worker'd almost bow down to ya. There's been a lotta change.

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Drinking.

“There wuz a lotta drinkin, by the men in the shops, that is by some men. Others din't drink atall.

“But the men din't do all the drinking. The women did their share too and it wusn't the young women neither. A lotta the older women'd gather in some one's home, and they'd send a kid with a pail ta the back door of one a the bar rooms that wuz scattered all over the city. The kid'd knock on the back door and give in the pail and the money, and then he'd soon get a pail with the foam runnin' over the top. Many's the time when I wuz a kid, did I earn a bit a money goin' after beer fur a bunch a old women who had come ta chew the fat in some one's kitchen.

“They din't often get drunk, but they got ta feelin' good. An' offen times their men were in the bar feelin' the same way.

“And we kids that fetched the beer soon found out which bar gave the best measure. Sometimes the pail'd be half full a foam and then by the time you'd get back to the house ya wuz carrying it ta, you'd only have a half pail. We got on ta that fur if we din't bring good measure, they wouldn't pay us ta do it the next time.”

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Racial complexity of the Shoe Army

“Taday the shops has all kinds a people workin' in 'em. When I first went in, there was jest Yankees and Irish and Irish - Americans. [used?]

“The strikes brought in a lot from the provinces (Canada) and a lotta folks from down Maine. Later the Greeks come, and the Italians, the Germans, the Polish and a lotta others.”

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Aunt Mary told her side of this story. There was considerable hard feeling against these from Canada and Nova Scotia.

“Durin' a rush season, those from the provinces and Nova Scotia would come ta help in the stitchin' room. How they'd work ta get our jobs when the rush season wuz over. They'd soup and stay after closin' time and bring presents the foreland forelady . But they din't get anything fur it. [? ?]

“For many's the times the forelady would bring me a case a miss's shoes. There's wuzn't sa such ta stich on them as on the grown-ups and ya'd get as much pay fur it. Them wuz the pick of the lot in the stitchin' room. Children's din't have sa much ta stitch either but there wuz more a them ta a case. An' we got paid by the case.”